

Welcome to the future

By Brian S. Kabateck



We all bring to the table our life experiences. I grew up in a family that was committed to service and giving back. My parents taught me that while earning a living was important, it was just as important to contribute to your town, your community and your neighborhood. Even now, my parents continue to serve on numerous nonprofit boards and charitable organizations. I learned from their example.

My maternal grandparents survived the Armenian Genocide. My grandfather was a young man studying at the University of Edinburgh and planned to return to Armenia in the rural Ottoman Empire when his family was killed. My grandmother watched her entire family murdered at the hands of tyranny and an out-of-control government overrun by zealots. They independently escaped to America for a better life, where they ended up in Fresno with my grandfather as the local parish priest.

These lessons led me—and my colleague and friend, Mark Geragos, himself the descendant of Genocide survivors—to bring the first ever lawsuits against insurance companies and banks for the recovery of stolen assets and unpaid insurance policies for the descendents of the Armenian Genocide. This was only possible because our state Legislature passed laws authorizing lawsuits nearly 100 years after the Genocide—an atrocity that our nation has failed to recognize. These laws are threatened today.

My paternal grandparents left the Midwest nearly 100 years ago and came to Los Angeles. They struggled through the Great Depression. My grandfather worked hard his whole life. My father was born there, served in the military, went to school on the Veteran's Bill, started working right away and hasn't stopped. He instilled in me a strong work ethic. He has worked hard every day of his life to support his family.

That work ethic, plus a belief that we could succeed, led me to overcome obstacles and start my own firm and build my own businesses. But I continue to recognize that the opportunities I had did not and do not exist for others, because of their socioeconomic status, race, orientation or gender.

My parents and family taught me that all Americans are equal whether they are immigrants, like my maternal grandparents, first generation like my mother and wife, or have lived here for many generations like my father. I understood growing up that the color of a person's skin shouldn't matter. These values led me and my law partner, Rich Kellner, himself the son of Holocaust survivors, to represent the NAACP in national discriminatory lending cases against the major banks for the meltdown of the economy in the last decade.

I wanted to become a lawyer when I was fourteen because I knew lawyers could make a difference. I first started working in small personal injury law firms more than 30 years ago while a freshman in college. There I learned that most people in America do not have ready access to justice. Over ninety percent of Americans don't even know a lawyer, don't have access to a lawyer and have no way to hire a lawyer if they need one. I grew up surrounded by conservative Republicans, yet I never equated the principles of fairness and equity with either Republican or Democratic values. After all, why would giving people their day in court be remotely political? Our state and Federal justice system was created to be bipartisan and stood for equality. Sadly, I learned quickly that the judicial system can be manipulated because big business and corporations often have an arsenal of well-educated and well-funded lawyers at their disposal.

Over twelve years ago, I became involved in the Consumer Attorneys of California after our state Insurance Commissioner sold out policyholders' claims against their insurers relating to the Northridge Earthquake. I worked with CAOC to change the law and give policyholders a fair break at reopening claims the insurers had closed for damage to their homes.

This organization, as well as its sister trial lawyer organizations around the state, is faced with new challenges. We must continue making strides to look more like the California we represent. We have to step up our fight against the growing corporate and business interests in Sacramento who want to manipulate the judicial system. We have to confront the realities today that money knows no ideology and some people are willing to buy and sell access to justice to the highest bidder. We must lead the charge in supporting an underfunded and under-respected state judicial system. We have to take the responsibility for lawyers who abuse the system. And we have to confront issues which take on a national and global significance in California.

So it is my time to serve as president. And it's our time to move forward. But I can't do it alone and must be joined by others who share our vision of the future. I ask that each of you make a new commitment and accept the challenge, join the battle and prepare to stand shoulder to shoulder. No retreat, no surrender! ■

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